

## Adult education in Oakland faces budget cuts, layoffs



Students in one of Oakland's GED classes offered by the Students in a GED class offered by Oakland's Adult Education program listen as thier instructor explains parallel structure.

**By: Lillian R. Mongeau**

*March 31, 2010 – 11:33 am*

In Russia, Murod Lutfiyev was a veterinarian. In Oakland, he is a laid-off parking attendant taking a General Education Development, or GED, course in a spacious classroom at a converted Parks and Recreation building in downtown Oakland. His change in status has not dimmed his hopes for a successful future in America.

"I want to improve my English and work here in my field," Lutfiyev said from the front row of Carolyn Chin's two and a half hour GED course.

"Every day I am humbled by your effort," Chin, who has taught adult education in Oakland for over 15 years, told the class after Lutfiyev explained his story. "I have so much respect for what you all are doing."

The class of 17 smiled at her approval and some fiddled nervously with their English grammar worksheets. Though a few students had dropped out of high school in the US and were now returning to complete their degrees, 13 members of the class said they had immigrated to Oakland from another country and were taking the GED course so that they could work or pursue further education.

In addition to GED classes, Oakland's Adult Education program has historically offered courses ranging from English as a Second Language to enrichment classes for senior citizens. Like the city's K-12 system however, Adult Ed is facing massive cuts and administrators have had to narrow the program's focus.

Some students in Chin's class said they were aware of the upcoming budget cuts and cited the

cuts as a reason to attend Adult Ed. "It's free here," said Katherine Lei, who followed her husband to Oakland from China. "As a new immigrant it's very expensive [at a community college]. Here is a good place to start."

A block away, Brigitte Marshall, director of Oakland's Adult and Career Education program, is wrestling with the issues posed by budget reductions. Marshall said that since it was still unclear exactly which classes they would be cutting next year, the program had not yet gone into detail with its adult students about the cuts. "We haven't fomented a lot of anxiety and concern," Marshall said, adding that many students already had enough to worry about—children, money, employment, citizenship applications, refugee status—without adding fears that their classes would be discontinued.



Adult Ed student Faqir Mohamad Kamal Uddin, 59, works on his latest English vocabulary worksheet in his Level 2 English as a Second Language course. Uddin is from Afghanistan.

On paper, the district is reallocating \$7.5 million in Adult Education funding, but a portion of that money will be returned to the program via a separate funding stream, Marshall said. Because of a recent legal change wrought by the California Budget Act of 2009, money that was once earmarked for adult education can now be redirected to other programs. For the 2010-2011 school year, \$4.5 million of Oakland's Adult Ed budget will be reallocated to K-12 programs and will no longer be available for the Adult Ed program to use. This is after the 20 percent cut made at the state level last year. Another \$3 million of the program's reserve will also be spent on K-12 education, but that amount will be reimbursed by the district out of a facilities fund.

Before the California Budget Act went into affect, adult education programs in the state had a protected funding stream, Marshall said, and the school districts were merely the governing agency through which the funding flowed. The act, which was designed to stanch California's bleeding budget, changed that. Now, the funding once earmarked only for adult education is available for use by the district for any educational purpose if it deems that the money is better spent elsewhere.

"It's a really awful position we've been put in because it puts adult education in the position of having to compete with other parts of the school district for very scarce resources," Marshall said. She doesn't fault the Oakland Unified School District for deciding to redirect some funding for use in K-12 instruction, she said, because "adult education is not their core mission. It makes complete sense. It makes me desperately sad—but it makes complete sense."

District spokesman Troy Flint echoed this sentiment. "The district does not have any plans to eliminate Adult Ed," he said, "but we are in a budget squeeze and I can understand why people are wondering whether we care. We do care, but when there's a situation in which we have to choose between Adult Ed and K-12 ed, K-12 is our area of emphasis."

In recent years, Oakland's Adult Education program has managed to build up a reserve of funding that administrators intended to use for facilities repair, and the OUSD will redirect \$3 million from this reserve toward K-12 needs. However, the district will be spending an equivalent amount on Adult Education facilities upgrades using a separate facilities improvement fund that cannot be spent on instruction. Marshall said she approved of this move, calling it "smart money management."

Adult Ed also faces cuts to its instructional programs. The 20 percent cut issued at the state level last year and the \$4.5 million OUSD plans to reallocate in 2010-2011 means that Adult Ed will be cutting courses and staff, Marshall said. On March 15, Marshall had the unpleasant task of distributing 115 pink slips to part-time teachers, a few full-time teachers, and a handful of staff and administrators. The program has also had to completely cut enrichment and lifestyle programming for older adults, all summer and weekend programming, most afternoon programming and two nights a week of evening programming. Marshall said Adult Ed will now be entirely focused on the

highest need areas in Oakland: foundational literacy, basic skills and workforce training.

Though intensive study has been put into determining the highest priority Adult Ed offerings, Marshall said, it is still very difficult to decide what classes to cut. "How do you determine if a class teaching English to parents is more important than a citizenship class for immigrants trying to naturalize?" she asked.

Since teaching English qualifies as foundational literacy and the citizenship class could aid an immigrant in landing a job, both are considered high priority and Marshall hopes to avoid cutting either type of class. Lutfiyev's GED class falls under the category of workforce training, since a GED certificate is a requirement for many jobs and advanced educational programs in the US. "More than 90 percent of the growth in the California workforce in the next 20 years will be provided by immigrants and their children," Marshall said. "If we fail to educate them we are fundamentally crippling the economy."

However, she said, other classes like English as a Second Language may have to be the next to go if administrators are forced to make more cuts. Level 2 English as a Second Language, taught by veteran teacher Larry Viles, meets on the ground floor of Adult Ed's main building on 8th Street and International Boulevard. All 34 students in the class moved to the US within the past few years; they range in age from barely 20 to nearly 60 and hail from ten countries including China, Eritrea, Bhutan, Cuba, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Burma and Vietnam.



The students in Larry Viles' Level 2 ESL course hail from 10 different countries.

For student Maria Ramos, the Level 2 class is a key part of her long-term plan. She arrived in the US from Mexico two months ago and plans to take the ESL classes first in order to start on GED classes so that she can pursue a higher education or a job. Ramos speaks some English already and said she likes the way Viles instructs students to pay attention to each other in class so that they can learn from everything that is said.

Ramos' classmate Faqir Mohammad Kamal Uddin was born in Afghanistan in 1960. At 59, he, too, is a fairly recent immigrant to Oakland, having moved here only two and a half years ago, and he is one of the oldest members of Tuesday morning's course. He said he "like[s] this class because our teacher is very well. He's teaching us the English."

And why does he want to learn English?

"Because I like America," Uddin said with a smile and a shrug, as if this was the most obvious answer in the world.

---

Filed Under: Economy, Education, Featured, Front, Politics